

# All too Greek?

## Herodotus on the Ionian revolt

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In the second half of the sixth century BC the Greek cities most renowned for their wealth, their architectural splendour and their rich culture were to be found not on the Greek mainland but further east, along the coast of Asia Minor. For a glorious half-century these cities – foremost among them Miletus, Ephesus and Samos – must have been the envy of the Aegean world. Vast temples were built to Artemis at Ephesus, Hera at Samos and to Apollo at Didyma just outside Miletus. Didyma was the seat of an oracle of Apollo second only to Delphi in its wealth and fame. Spectacular dedications were made at these temples, by Greeks but also by non-Greeks, including kings of Lydia and Egyptian Pharaohs.

And then suddenly disaster struck. In 494 B.C. Miletus was razed to the ground, the temple at Didyma destroyed. The oracle fell silent for nearly 200 years. Work on the temple of Hera on Samos, which would have been the largest Greek temple ever built, was abandoned forever. And up and down the coast of Asia Minor Greek cities saw their homes destroyed and their children taken into slavery.

### A flood of digressions?

The cause of this catastrophe was a sequence of events which historians refer to as the Ionian Revolt, and we know about them from the *Histories* of Herodotus. Born only ten years after the disaster, in Halicarnassus on the east coast of the Aegean, he will have grown up surrounded by the material evidence of the fall of Ionia from splendour to ruin. Herodotus devotes quite a lot of his work to the events in Ionia at the start of the fifth century (Book 5.11 to Book 6.43), but many scholars have criticized his account for its omissions and its lack of clarity, and many readers find themselves lost in a flood of digressions that seems to overwhelm the narrative. But Herodotus never includes digressions simply for their own sake, and the digressions in Book Five are, I'd like to argue, where Herodotus provides his explanation for the Ionian catastrophe.

A simple example will illustrate Herodotus' method. The story of revolt begins with Histiaeus of Miletus being granted permission to go and found a city at Myrcinus on the north coast of the Aegean (5.11). Immediately after mentioning this Herodotus describes how the Persian king Darius, impressed by the abilities, not to mention the figure, of a Paeonian woman, decides to transport the entire Paeonian nation from Europe to Asia (5.12–16). The message is clear: if Histiaeus wants a city for himself, he may, with Darius' consent, go and try to build one: if Darius wants a whole nation for himself, he needs only to say the word, and it will fall under his control. Given this imbalance in power, what can Histiaeus ever hope to achieve in the revolt he goes on to instigate?

Herodotus describes the beginnings of the revolt: Aristagoras, deputy governor of Miletus, has been involved in an unsuccessful expedition against the island of Naxos, and is in danger of losing his position; meanwhile Histiaeus, now stuck at the Persian court in Susa, has sent a message to him, tattooed on the head of a slave, urging him to revolt. Aristagoras is able to win the support of other Greeks in Ionia, and the revolt begins. But

before he narrates the events of the revolt, Herodotus suddenly changes direction. He tells how Aristagoras goes as an ambassador to Sparta and Athens in search of aid, and uses this as an opportunity to talk about the history of these two cities. The resulting accounts take up nearly half of Book Five: what is he trying to tell us?

### Greek disunity

It is a trick that Herodotus used earlier in his work, when he described Croesus of Lydia sending ambassadors to the same two cities (1.56–68), and in fact Athens and Sparta have hardly been mentioned between these two occasions. How do Athens and Sparta at the time of Aristagoras differ from Athens and Sparta at the time of Croesus? The contrast is dramatic. In Book One Herodotus narrates the story of the rise of the tyrant Peisistratus, but he presents it in a reasonably positive light: Athens 'had been split by faction' (1.59) but now Peisistratus had undisputed power (1.64) and his rule was fair – 'he adorned the city well and beautifully' (1.59). Meanwhile Sparta had risen from a fit of depression and from being 'the worst governed people in Greece' (1.65) until 'they had now subdued the greater part of the Peloponnese' (1.68). In Book Five Aristagoras finds Sparta ruled by Cleomenes, a king 'not quite right in the head – even, indeed, on the verge of madness' (5.42). Cleomenes had driven away his half-brother Dorieus and he has to be advised not to take a bribe by his eight-year old daughter Gorgo (5.51). This is a rather depressing portrait of Sparta. And Athens is not without its own problems. It is at this point that Herodotus describes the beginning of the Athenian democracy, and comments 'thus Athens went from strength to strength, and proved, if proof were needed, how noble a thing equality before the law is, not in one respect only, but in all' (5.77), but these words of praise come in the middle of a long series of rather less palatable matters: murder, sacrilege, civil war, and once again madness: in one episode a group of Athenians attempt to seize two statues from an Aeginetan temple and are driven mad as a result – they hack each other to death, and the sole survivor is killed by the wives of the others, who stab him with their brooches (5.85–87).

The overwhelming effect of the long digressions about mainland Greece in book 5 (5.39–48, 55–96) is to emphasize Greek disunity and impiety; things have changed since the events narrated in book 1. Greek city fights Greek city, Athenian fights Athenian, brother drives out brother; military expeditions fall apart in recrimination and even in violence. Furthermore suppliants are killed at altars, cult-statues seized from sanctuaries, oracles bribed, temples entered by those who have no right to do so, and respectable women attending a festival are humiliated by a necrophiliac tyrant. With this history behind them, what hope was there that the mainland Greeks could help the Ionians? Small wonder that when the Athenians decide to give aid to Aristagoras, Herodotus comments: 'these ships were the beginnings of evils for Greeks and barbarians' (5.97).

### A world turned upside down

Equally importantly, many of the events in Ionia from this point on have been prefigured in the digressions. The destruction of the temple of Cybele during the Greek attack on Sardis, an event which Herodotus says gave Darius a pretext for the destruction of the temples of Greek cities (5.102), is an act of casual sacrilege like many of those committed on the mainland. The account of Aristagoras' flight and death (5.124–126) is an unheroic version of the story of Dorieus (5.42–48). The dissolution of the Greek fleet before the climactic battle of Lade (6.11–14) is like that of the Peloponnesian army sent to restore Isagoras to power in Athens (5.74–75). This is not accidental. In Herodotus' presentation of events, the Ionians behave just like other Greeks. Some scholars have argued that Herodotus shows bias against the Ionians, and that he blames them for their own misfortunes, but this will not work. The Ionians suffered in the Ionian revolt not because they were worse than other Greeks, but because they were just like them.

For Herodotus even the final settlement of Ionia is rich in irony and the unexpected. The Persian commander Mardonius 'suppressed the tyrants in all the Ionian states and set up democratic institutions in their place' (6.43). Herodotus comments that Mardonius' actions 'will come as a great marvel to those Greeks who cannot believe that Otanes declared to the seven conspirators that Persia should have a democratic government'. But the real irony is that Mardonius is doing this while on his way with a vast army and fleet to conquer Greece, and in particular to suppress the democratic city of Athens. And this too has been prefigured in the earlier narrative: Herodotus has already described a Spartan attempt to suppress the Athenian democracy and restore tyranny in the long digression on Athenian history in Book Five. In that episode the Corinthian Sosicles makes a comment that may stand as emblematic for the whole of this part of Herodotus' work:

*Upon my word, gentlemen, this is like turning the universe upside-down. Earth and sky will soon be changing places – men will be living in the sea and fish on land, now that you Spartans are proposing to abolish popular government and restore despotism in the cities. (5.92a)*

It is perhaps for this reason that scholars find it difficult to make sense of his account: too often the world really is being turned upside-down. And perhaps the greatest example of the impossible happening was yet to come: what was truly a wonder was not that the Greeks should fail so spectacularly in Ionia, but that they should succeed so spectacularly at Marathon, Salamis, Plataea and Mycale. But that is another story.

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